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TO AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS PRIORITY

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NODIS

FOLLOWING REPEAT AMMAN 2227 ACTION SECSTATE DTD 26 APR

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S E C R E T AMMAN 2227

NODIS

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, LE, SY,XF

SUBJECT: TALK WITH RIFAI -- SITUATION IN LEBANON

REF: STATE 100420

1. SUMMARY: RIFAI GAVE ME A DEBRIEF ON HIS MEETING WITH ASAD IN DAMASCUS APRIL 23. GOOD PORTION OF THE MEETING FOCUSED ON LEBANON AND ASAD'S VIEWS. RIFAI SAYS ASAD UNDERSTANDS THERE IS A REAL LIMIT TO WHICH HE CAN GO IN USING MILITARY POWER TO SETTLE THE ISSUE. ASAD IS PREPARED TO CONTINUE TO PUSH DIPLOMACY AND AVOID MASSIVE INTERVENTION. ASAD FEELS HE HAS BROUGHT AN IRON CURTAIN DOWN ABOUT THE LEBANESE AND IS INTERDICTING THE PASSAGE OF ALL SUPPLIES INCLUDING FOOD TO FORCES HE CONSIDERS IT NECESSARY TO CONTROL--

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JUMBLATT AND THE PALESTINAIANS. ASAD FAVORS SARKIS FOR

THE PRESIDENCY BECAUSE HE IS THE LEAST WORST OF THE CANDIDATES AND SYRIAN BELIEVE THEY CAN COOPERATE WITH HIM AND HE WITH THEM. RIFAI SAYS SYRIANS STILL PUT STRONG EMPHASES ON REESTABLISHMENT OF SECURITY FOLLOWING PLAOUT OF CURRENTTPOLITICAL SCENARIO AND WOULD LIKE TO HAVE A PART IN IT. RIFAI DID NOT GIVE ME THE IMPRES- SION SYRIANS DEMANDING A DOMINANT ROLE OR RIGHT TO INTERVEN HEAVILY TO ESTABLISH LONG-TERM SECURITY IN LEBANON. RIFAI SAYS SYRIANS REMAIN DISTRUSTFUL OF OUR ACTIONS AND OUR DECLARATIONS OF INTENTION IN LEBANON. HE BELIEVES THAT ONLY WAY TO BUILD OUR CREDIBILITY WITH THE SYRIANS IS TO KEEP THEM INFORMED OF SITUATION AND TO CONTINUE TO MAKE OUR WORK AND OUR ACTIONS COINCIDE. AS KING IS IN AQABA FOR THE NEXT DAY OR SO, I PASSED MESSAGE REFTEL TO RIFAI FOR HIM. WILL OF COURSE BE SEEING KING ON HIS RETURN, PROBABLY IN NEXT FEW DAYS. END SUMMARY.

1. WHEN I SAW RIFAI APRIL 26 A LARGE PORTION OF OUR CONVERSATION WAS DEVOTED TO A DEBRIEF BY HIM OF HIS EXTENSIVE TALK WITH ASAD. MOST OF HIS CONVERSATION WITH ASAD WAS DEVOTED TO LEBANON.

2. RIFAI BEGAN BY SAYING THAT ASAD HAS A VERY CLEAR IDEA OF THE LIMITATIONS ON HIS ACTIONS. HE ALSO SAID THAT ASAD IS PREPARED AND DETERMINED TO CONTINUE FORCEFULLY TO PURSUE HIS INTERESTS,BUT DOES NOT HAVE IN MIND ADDITIONAL MILITARY INTERVENTION AT THE MOMENT.

3. RIFAI SAID THAT ASAD ASKED HIM WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF HE MOVED SOME OF HIS ARMORED FORCES INTO LEBANON AND CLEANED UP THE SITUATION. RIFAI SAID HE TOLD ASAD THAT SYRIAN WOULD THEN BE FACED WITH TWO CHOICES STIMULATED BY AN IMMEDIATE ISRAELI OCCUPATION OF LEBANON SOUTH OF THE LITANI: (A) TO MOVE NEW FORCES IN ANDFIGHT ISRAEL AND GET BADLY CHEWED UP. (HE ADDED THAT JORDAN IF IT SUPPORTED SYRIA UNDER THOSE CIRCUMSTANCES WOULD HAVE ITS NECK BROKEN BY THE ISRAELIS). THE SECOND ALTERNATIVE (B) WAS TO AVOID A CONFLICT WITH THE ISRAELIS. UNDER THESE CIRCUMSTANCES, THE WHOLE ARAB WORLD WOULD BE AGAINST HIM, CHARGE

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COLLUSION WITH ISRAEL AND THE EFFECTS ON THE SYRIAN POSITION IN LEBANON AND IN THE ARAB WORLD IN GENERAL WOULD BE DISASTROUS. ASAD,ACCORDING TO RIFAI, SAID HE AGREED FULLY WITH THIS ASSESSMENT AND APPRECIATED THE LIMITATIONS PLACED ON HIS ACTIONS BY THE OBJECTIVE CIRCUMSTANCES.

4. ASAD TOLD RIFAI HE HAS BROUGHT AN IRON CURTAIN DOWN AROUND LEBANON TO PREVENT THE MOVEMENT OF ANY SUPPLIES

IN AND OUT. ONLY THE PORT OF JOUNIEH IS OPEN AND THE CHRISTIAN RIGHTISTS ARE PERMITTED BY THE SYRIANS TO RECIEVE SUPPLIES THROUGH THAT PORT. ASAD CLAIMED HE COULD EVEN CUT OFF FOOD SUPPLY TO JUMBLATT AND ARAFAT. ASAD'S ASSESSMENT IS THAT IF LARGE SCALE FIGHTING BREAKS OUT AGAIN, THE LEFTISTS AND THE PALESTINIANS ONLY HAVE ENOUGH SUPPLIES TO LAST FOR A FEW DAYS OF FULL SCALE FIGHTING. (AFTER RIFAI AND I REVIEWED THE SECRETARY'S MESSAGE,RIFAI SAID HE BELIEVED THAT JUMBLATT'S APPARENTLY MORE COOPERATIVE APPROACH WAS GENERATED BY ASAD'S BLOCKADE OF MATERIEL AND BY ASAD'S EFFORTS TO OPEN SOME DAYLIGHT BETWEEN ARAFAT AND JUMBLATT.)

5. RIFAI FURTHER NOTED THAT ASAD TOLD HIM LUCIEN DADDAH HAD BEEN IN DAMASCUS BEFORE RIFAI'S ARRIVAL. DADDEAH HAD CONVEYED TO ASAD SAME IDEAS THAT FRANGIEH, FROM YOUR MESSAGE, HAD TOLD DEAN. ASAD TOLD DADDAH THAT IT WAS RIDICULOUS THAT FRANGIEH WAS INSISTING ON STAYING ON IN ON IN OFFICE AFTER THE NEW PRESIDENT WAS ELECTED EITHER THE NEW PRESIDENT WOULD HAVE TO SUPPORT THIS AND DESTROY HIS OWN FUTURE IN LEBANON OR THE NEW PRESIDENT WOULD HAVE TO OPPOSE FRANGIEH AND CREATEANOTHER POINT OF CONTROVERSSY. ASAD WAS INSISTING THAT FRANGIEH RESIGN SOON AFTER NEW PRESIDENT IS ELECTED. AFTER ALL HE HAD ONLY FOUR MONTHS LEFT TO SERVE ANYWAY. (RIFAI ADDED AT THIS POINT IN OUR CONVERSATION THAT HE HOPED VERY MUCH THE NEW PRESIDENT COULD BE ELECTED BEFORE MAY 2 WHEN LEBANESE PARLIAMENT BEGINS ITS TWO YEAR, SELF-APPINTED EXTENSION OF POWER. HE SAID LEBANESE APPEAR TO SET STORE BY HAVING THE "LEGITIMATE" RATHER THAN THE "EXTENDED" PARLIAMENT ELECT THE NEW PRESIDENT. I RECALLED FOR IRFAI SECRETARY'S PRESS CONFERENCE STATEMENTS
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HOPING FOR EARLY ACTION ON THIS POINT).

6. RIFAI SAID THAT HE DISCUSSED WITH ASAD THE PRESIDENTIAL PERSONALITIES. ASAD IS DEAD SET AGAINST EDDE ACCORDING TO RIFAI. KNOWING RIFAI AND THE JOREANIANS FAVOR EDDE CANDICACY I PUSHED RIFAI AS TO WHY. RIFAI SAID HE ASKED ASAD THE SAME THING. ACCORDING TO ASAD, EDDE HAS BEEN DEEPLY CRITICAL OF THE SYRIANS FOR A LONG TIME. EDDE WILL NOT OPERATE AN AN "ARAB" FINALLY RIFAI SAID THAT ASAD INSISTS THAT EDDE IS THE CANDIDATE OF THE UNITED STATES, JUMBLATT AND ABU AMMAR (ARAFA). RIAI LAUGHED AS HE MADE THE LAST POINT. HE SAID ASAD STILL INSISTED ON IT. RIFAI THEN NOTED THAT ASAD HAD TICKED OFF FOR HIM HIS OWN VIEWS ABOUT OTHER PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES.. JEAN AZIZ IS TOO OLD

AND FOSSILIZED TO ACT. PIERRE HELOU (RIFAI WASN'T SURE THAT ASAS WAS TALKING ABOUT HIM) IS TOO MUCH A MERCHANT, TOO SURROUNDED BY COMMISSION AGENTS, AND TOO LITTLE A POLITICIAN TO COUNT. RIFAI NOTED THAT ASAD CLAIMED HE HAD NEVER MET SARKIS, ASAD'S CHIEF CANDIDATE. NEVERTHELESS ASAD WAS CONVINCED THAT SARKIS HAD POPULAR SUPPORT. HE SAID SARKIS ONLY LOST TO FRANGIEH BY ONE VOTE IN THE LAST ELECTION, THAT SARKIS WAS WILLING TO BE COOPERATIVE, AND THAT SARKIS HAD BEANON'S INTEREST AT HEAR. ASAD INSISTED THAT HE WILL NOT DIRECTLY OPPOSE EDDE, BUT WILL PUT AROUND THE WORD THAT SYRIA WILL NOT COOPERATE WITH EDDE. FURTHER, ASAD INSISTED QUITE PIOUSLY THAT HE COULD NOT CONTROL ANY VOTES IN THE LEBANESE PARLIAMENT AND THAT IT WAS UP TO THE LEBANESE TO DECIDE WHO THEY WANTED, WARNING AGAIN ABOUT HIS NON-COOPERATION WITH EDDE.

7. RIFAI SAID THAT ASAD SEEMS TO HAVE REMAINED SUSPICIOUS OF THE UNITED STATES THROUGHOUT ALL OF OUR DEALINGS WITH HIM ON LEBANON. WHEN I PRESSED RIFAI FOR SPECIFICS AND WHAT HE REALLY MEANT, HE SAID THAT THE SYRIANS DISTRUSTED OUR MESSAGES WHICH TENDED TO MAKE PROMISES OR INDICATE THINGS WHICH WE WERE INTENDING TO DO BUT WHICH WE NEVER SEEMED QUITE PREPARED TO FULFILL. AGAIN I PRESSED RIFAI FOR HIS SPECIFICS AND HIS VIEWS ON HOW WE SHOULD HANDLE THE SYRIANS

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IN THE SITUATION. RIFAI SAID THAT ASAD HAD SPECIFICALLY MENTIONED TO HIM OUR PASSING MESSAGES TO ASAD WHICH SPOKE ABOUT THE FACT THAT DEAN BROWN WAS "PERSONALLY" EXPLORING VARIOUS POSITIONS AND SEEKING A SYRIAN REACTION. THE SYRIANS DID NOT LIKE THE POSITIONS. HOWEVER, THEY WERE INSULTED BY THE IDEA THAT THE U.S. THOUGHT THAT SYRIA COULD BE LED TO BELIEVE THAT ONE OF ITS REPRESENTATIVES WAS ACTING ON HIS OWN AND WITHOUT THE FULL BACKING AND SUPPORT OF THE U.S. GOVERNMENT. TO THE SYRIANS THE CONCEPT WAS NOT ACCEPTABLE AND IN SURVEYING THE CONCEPT THEY DID NOT BELIEVE THE U.S. WAS TREATING THEM HONESTLY OR OPENLY.

8. ON WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE THINGS, RIFAI SAID IT WAS A TOUGH PROBLEM AND HE HAD NO READY FORMULAS. HE SAID IT WAS PROBABLY IMPORTANT THAT WE CONTINUE TO LET OUR ACTIONS IN THE AREA BE THE BASIS ON WHICH THE SYRIANS DECIDE ABOUT WHAT IS HAPPENING. HE DID NOT BE ANY MEANS RECOMMEND OUR CUTTING OFF THE FLOW OF MESSAGES TO THE SYRIANS, BUT ONLY INSURE THAT WE PASS ON TO THEM THE FACTS AND FORGET EXCESSIVE REASSURANCES OF INTENTIONS, ETC. WHICH SYRIANS

DID NOT TRUST. I POINTED OUT TO HIM AT THIS POINT THAT THE INFORMATION WHICH WAS PASSED ON IN THE MESSAGE I GAVE HIM TODAY FOR THE KING ON THE SITUATION ON LEBANON WAS ALSO EXACTLY WHAT WE WERE TELLING ASAD. RIFAI SAID THOUGHT THIS SHOULD CONTINUE TO BE OUR APPROACH AND THAT THE LONGER TERM BUILDING OF RELATIONS WITH SYRIA HAD TO DEPEND ON U.S. ACTIONS RATHER THAN ON A LOT OF CAREFULLY HEDGED MESSAGES.

9. RIFAI ALSO NOTED AT THIS POINT THAT HE CERTAINLY HOPED IT WOULD BE POSSIBLE FOR PRESIDENT ASAD AND PRESIDENT FORD TO MEET AT SOME TIME. HE BELIEVES THAT SUCH A MEETING COULD DO A GREAT DEAL TO BUILD CONFIDENCE AND CREDIBILITY AS THE TWO PRESIDENTS ARE VERY MUCH ALIKE IN DIRECTNESS AND PERSONALITY.

10. SUGGEST DEPARTMENT REPEAT TO DAMASCUS AND PASS TO AMBASSADOR BROWN IN WASHINGTON OR BEIRUT AS SITUATION MAY REQUIRE. PICKERING UNQTE
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